

Now, as we passed across the emptiness of the dry brown plain in Bolivia, I noticed a woman near the front of the bus stealing glances at me. She was in her late thirties, I guessed, with many of her youthful dreams exhausted, but she hadn't given up on her earliest hopes entirely. She had applied some lipstick and blusher this morning and put on a cross that silvered her throat; she seemed to be trying to work out who I was as I sat in my row alone, looking out on the sand-colored quiet.

Finally, as we drew near Copacabana, she struggled back through the jouncing vehicle and asked me if I was the person who had requested a guide. I was, so she sat down beside me and, pulling her shoulder-length hair back from her face, smiled and began to tell me the facts of Bolivia in a spirited near-English.

Whatever was really compelling here, though, lay outside the reach of facts and figures: a brown-hooded Catholic priest was standing outside the main church as we drew into town, blessing the toy cars and houses that villagers had brought to him. Some of the indigenous souls before him were carrying dolls swaddled in blankets, and he was making the sign of the cross above them and above some SUVs. This was the leap of faith I had seen, in both directions, on every continent: the Indians would believe that this figure could stand for something greater—as wide as the high skies above them—regardless of the man he was in private; he, in turn, would leave his usual self behind to try to extend some blessing to these strangers. My guide looked up at me, and I asked her how much these people were Christian, how much listening to some older law.

She couldn't say exactly—or didn't want to—and when we got off the bus, I suggested she take a couple of hours off, so she could be free of me and the recitation of numbers; when we met up again in early afternoon, she broke into a warm smile as if we were long-lost friends. We got into a boat and traveled out to a sunlit island—the Capri of Lake Titicaca, it could seem—and climbed up a hill to look down upon the water. “This is a place to escape to,” she said, and something wistful came into the midsummer day. Maybe this was not only a job for her, but an excursion, a way to step into another life?

On the boat back into town, she started to rub the stress out of my shoulders. “Too much reading,” she said, with a shy smile. “Too much writing.”

Night was beginning to fall as we got into the bus for the long trip back. Most of the other passengers were falling asleep where they sat, and in any case we were curtained off from them by the foreign language we spoke. The seats were small, so we were very close. As she asked me about my life in Japan, I could see all the glimmering lights—freedom, mobility, the lure of the far-off—that had come into the friendly woman's life this day. I'd found this theme echoed in every page of Graham Greene: the foreigner, precisely by going to another country, brings a whiff of a different world into the lives of the locals he meets.

From that point on, both are in the shadowland that lies between the existence we lead and the one we occasionally dream of.

“It’s strange to have lost my passport today,” I said, as occasional lamps from passing huts flickered behind us in the dark. “It’s almost like losing my identity.”

We’d come to a small lake that morning and stepped into a rowboat to go across it. When we’d emerged at the other shore, two policemen in uniforms had asked us for IDs. I’d presented a passport (a backup one I carried for just such moments), and they’d looked at it, looked at me and then taken the passport away. I never saw it again.

“Of course!” my guide had said, with a laugh. “The last foreign people who came here who looked like you were hiding in La Paz while they prepared their attack on New York City. Why else would someone from a poor country come to Bolivia?”

Now, as we remembered the moment, the woman laughed again and put a hand on my arm. A local habit, I thought; but perhaps not only a local habit. I could see her smile in the dark— it was pitch black outside as we lurched through the emptiness— and a part of me wondered what she was smiling at, or for. My life was as hazy to her as hers might be to me; each of us could fill in the empty space with anything we chose.

In Graham Greene books such equivocal partnerships may be all that we can hope for; in a world where there are no absolutes, a qualified friendship based on your lack of illusions in the other (and in yourself) may be the only thing you can trust. In life, however, I’m not sure how much anyone is really happy on such uncertain ground; this woman had two children, whom this day was supporting, and I had a wife, Hiroko, in Japan. As we began to inch through the jam-packed streets not far from El Alto— the huge slum that marked the fastest growing city in South America— I passed on my hopes for her children’s future and, a little guiltily (I was never good at telling people what they needed to hear), warm thanks for all her guidance. Hastily, stumbling a little as she stood up— was it embarrassment? or only disappointment?— she rose to her feet in the narrow aisle and I pressed some notes in her palm, saying there was no need for her to come all the way to my hotel, I could find my way back there alone.

She fumbled her way through the bus and as it pulled away, she waved from the crowded sidewalk, in the dark, and then became just another face in the crowd, turning around to walk down the almost black, unpaved alleyways that led to corrugated-iron shacks, mountains of trash rising by their sides.

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